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Reagan policy goals supported, but means in dispute

By Louis Halasz

The Reagan adminstration seems to know where it wants to go but not how to get there.

It wants to demonstrate the reconciliation between the United States and Germany on the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, which is a laudable endeavor, but the ill-advised visit to the Bitburg cemetery opens, rather than closes, the gap between Americans and Germans.

The recent maneuverings over the issue of providing aid to the Nicaraguan contras is another reminder of the chasm that exists between the Reagan adminstration's foreign policy goals and the inadequate, often clumsy, means it employs to achieve them.

Ronald Reagan was elected and reelected president by the great majority of Americans because they agreed it was time that their country should stand tall again; strong, secure, confident, in full charge of her destiny.

Yet, in the effort to reassert American strength, the administration repeatedly commits mistakes that run from painful insensitivity to tragic blunders. Speaking of the anti-Sandinista guerrillas as modern equivalents of the Founding Fathers grates on American nerves; wanting to visit the German military cemetery but not, at least at first, a Nazi concentration camp is, for no fathomable reason, opening wounds not yet healed; speaking of the Brezhnev doctrine in the Central American context is plainly inaccurate; and the intervention in Lebanon, culminating in the needless sacrifice of the lives of 241 American marines, was an unmitigated tragedy.

There are two main areas of the world where truly vital American interests are involved. One is global, and it concerns the ongoing confrontation with the Soviet Union. The other is regional; it has to do with the challenge laid down by the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

While Americans in the Seventies were preoccupied with their own agonies, the Soviets single-mindedly forged ahead in building a military juggernaut with huge new missiles of silo-busting accuracy. The Carter administration was finally awakened by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and started a military catch-up program to prevent the achievement of a Soviet first-strike capability. The Reagan administration continued and accelerated the trend by requesting additional billions of dollars for defense purposes. The principle of the need was not, and is not, questioned; it is the way the goal is implemented that is in dispute.

Three projects come to mind in this context.

The first is the huge 10-warhead, super-accurate MX missles. The Carter administration proposed to build 200 of them and make them mobile so that the Soviets could not even think of taking them all out in one super-strike. The Reagan administration not only cut their numbers down to 100, but it made them immobile, placing them in silos whose location the Soviet generals know to the last inch — thus making them, theoretically at least, vulnerable to a first strike.

Why is Mr. Reagan wasting his dwindling political capital in forcing them on a reluctant Congress — so far 42 have been authorized — instead of speeding up the development of the smaller, one-warhead, more mobile, and much less expensive Midgetman missles that would keep the Soviet generals guessing?

The second project in question is the B-1 bomber, of which 100 are scheduled to be built by 1988, each costing $300 million. But the current version, the B-1B, is so loaded down with equipment that it is no longer a true supersonic bomber. Why not drop these lumbering giants and concentrate instead on the speeded-up production of the ATB, known as the stealth bomber, which is far more modern, virtually impervious to radar detection, hardly visible to the eye, truly supersonic, and could enter service by the end of the current decade?

Even more controversial is the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly known as "star wars." Here again, the trouble is not with the idea, but with the way is has been hyped.

For the United States to match and possibly outdistance the Soviets in this arena is obviously desirable. But this is far cry from Mr. Reagan's famous March, 1983, speech, in which he raised the prospect of an impervious space shield to protect the United States against all hostile missles. Whether such a foolproof system could ever be built is hotly disputed. If it turns out to be an impossible dream, it would prove not only a very expensive folly, but it would in the meantime lead to an accelerated race for more and more offensive missiles.

The trouble caused by the administration's lack of skill in handling the Soviet military challenge is dwarfed by the wave of contentions that envelop the problem of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. The issue is highly emotional both ways: the Sandinistas, just as the Fidelistas in Cuba, hate the United States with a vengeance. A majority of the Congress, mortally frightened by the nightmare of "another Vietnam," just as emotionally opposes any policy that could involve the United States directly in the conflict.

Yet, for those who watch the politics of the area from the United Nations, a few facts stand out.

☐ The Sandinista regime is just as pro-Soviet as is that of Fidel Castro: its press conference utterances, its speeches in debates, and its votes on issues prove that beyond any reasonable doubt.

☐ While the elimination of such a hostile regime would be in the U.S. best interest, to achieve it would be terribly costly. Charles W. Maynes, editor of the journal *Foreign Policy*, in a recent column quoted experts to the effect that an invasion of Nicaragua would result in 3,000 to 5,000 killed, as many as 18,000 wounded, and could cost over $10 billion in a five-year period.

☐ The Sandinista regime is on notice from the Soviet Union that, military supplies aside, if push comes to shove, it would have to face the music on its own.

☐ Consequently, the Sandinistas, like it or not, know they have to yield some to keep United States at bay. That means that Washington could learn to live with Managua as it has learned to live with Havana — provided that it kept up the pressure.

Trade embargoes are not likely to do the job; ample aid to the contras, on the other hand, would indeed help in keeping the screws tightened. But the United States continues to have diplomatic relations with Managua; it has an exchange of ambassadors with it, and it even maintains a direct dialogue. Under these circumstances, assistance should obviously be covert; that's what the CIA is for. But the CIA practically eliminated itself by inanities such as mining harbors, dissemination of execution manuals, and the like.

Hence the administration was forced to demand aid overtly, which is a kind of contradiction in terms. When Congress denied the aid, both American interests and the cause of the contras were hurt.

The paths leading to hell are paved with the best of intentions. Responding to the Soviet military challenge and keeping a neighboring, truly hostile, regime at bay are necessities. This is why the Reagan administration was provided with a repeated mandate by the American electorate.

By mishandling the all-important details of the task by hyperbole, inexperience, insensitivity and plain misfortune, the White House is getting itself boxed into corners from where it finds ever more difficult to extricate itself. The real problem is that it is the American public that may have to pay the bill in the end.

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